

Valiant Men Die Suddenly – March 30, 1964

Taken from the Daily Citizen News, Editors Notebook, by Mark Pace

The telephone rang yesterday morning at the fire hall. The fireman who picked it up and answered did so in a voice that told a story of shock, sorrow and tragedy.

After three fireman died under a collapsing wall of a manufacturing building, their buddy firemen toiled on in shock and disbelief.

The firemen were working side by side in an effort to save the remains of a building that reportedly was already practically destroyed. By the time the fire was discovered, the alarm turned in and the corps of firemen arrived at the scene, the roof was about to fall in.

Shortly after the firemen began battling the flames the roof did fall in, leaving the walls standing grotesquely in silhouette amid smoke and flames.

It was cold in the pre-dawn hours of Monday morning, the mercury in the low 20's. A stiff, cold wind, blowing out of the north, added to the misery of the firemen who were fighting desperately against a raging inferno of the fire and heat.

The big brick wall, facing north-south along E. Walnut Ave., was the killer.

Apparently the high wind blowing against it from the north was the cause of it toppling. At least that was the belief yesterday of Fire Chief Luther Broom.

Three firemen gone. And with the loss of their lives another tragedy.

Lt. Charles E. (Chigger) Joyce, Johnnie W. Wofford and John Earle Ingle. All of them were family men. All were fathers.

For awhile they were men of valor fighting a fire. The next minute they were gone-victims of the fire which they sought to bring under control.

For a community to have protection against fire it requires an arranged schedule for a given number of firemen to be on duty at all times. The three firemen who died under the crumbled mass of brick and mortar had spent Easter week-end with their families. They were off duty Saturday, and spent that day and that night with their loved ones. They reported back to the fire hall Easter Sunday at 8 a.m., little aware of the grim tragedy that awaited them.

But that is the life of a fireman- a public servant who stands ready and willing-without knowing this minute what fate the next minute may hold.

Broken Helmets Mute

Evidence Of Valor – March 30, 1964

Taken from the Daily-Citizen News, written by "Rip" Whitfield

Three shattered, broken helmets lay on the floor of the Dalton Fire Dept., this morning. They are mute evidence that three good men gave their lives battling a fire.

Several firemen stood reverently about the helmets the helmets and talked quietly about their three comrades who will fight fire no more, and of a forth firemen who lays seriously injured in Hamilton memorial Hospital

The three men were killed and the other injured when a wall collapsed this morning as they battled a blaze at Commercial Mills.

The dead are: Lt. Charles (chigger) Joyce, 38; Johnnie W. Wofford, 38; John Earl Ingle, 23. Injured is Raymond Phelps, 29.

These men were on the shift that went, to work yesterday at 8 a.m. and would have been relieved at 8 a.m. today.

On Job Easter Day

They were not able to be with their families on Easter. They spent their last day carrying out their job of protecting the City from fire,

"Tragic" was the word Fire Chief Luther Broome used to describe the events as he gathered up the personal effects of the three dead firemen and prepared to turn the articles over to their families.

"Great Shock"

Chief Broome said the men were just like brothers and it was a great shock to the entire department.

"The nine men on each shift spend half their lives together and the impact is terrific," the fire chief stated.

Mr. Broome said, "These men eat and sleep together. The loss has been a great shock."

Each shift of nine men works 24-hours and-is-off for 24 –hours.

Both shifts were on duty early this morning and most of the men appeared nervous and upset over the death of their brother firemen.

Knew It Would Come sometime

"It's something we have talked about happening and we knew that it would happen sometime,"

said Clarence Bramblett, one of the firemen.

Another firemen, Gordon Coker said "When you are working, you don't have time to think about an accident." He added, "It is just like an automobile accident. You always think about it happening to the other fellow."

Firemen Work Quietly

The firemen went quietly about their work this morning, drying hoses and cleaning equipment. There was no chatter and when someone spoke it was almost in a whisper.

There was a stream of visitors during a short period that a Daily-Citizen-News reporter was in the fire hall, including Mayor Carlton McCamy, Alderman Marvin Hackney, Superior Court Judge Tom Pope, and Rep. Tom Mitchell.

The telephone rang constantly and Chief Broome was kept busy answering newsmen's inquiries from various cities, some as far away as Jacksonville, Fla

Minister Recalls Tragedies Ex-Fireman Salutes The Men – March, 30, 1964

Taken from the Daily-Citizen News, written by Rev. J. C. Williamson, Baptist Association Missionary

Tragedy has again stalked among us. I am an old fireman who spent 16 years of my life in the uniform of the Chattanooga Fire Department riding the big red wagons. I want to say a word for those who protect our life and property.

Each day of his life a firemen lives with the prospect of a tragedy like the one that befell our firemen this morning. Yet, they learn never to worry about it until it comes.

In my fireman days, which ended April 1, 1941, when I became an associational missionary. I saw tragedy over and over among my friends. Five minutes after I walked out of the Number Five Hall one afternoon my company went out on a run and ended up in a store in an

intersectional wreck with ambulance also on emergency runs.

Tragedies Around Him

I stood one morning and helped play the lines on a fire and saw the body of one of my buddies carried by me. There wasn't a mark on him. He suffocated in the smoke of burning paper.

A lieutenant who brought his bride and began housekeeping in a duplex with us, died when a car ran in front of his engine on an 80-foot street. He and another died and not a man of that crew ever worked again.

I could add many other memories.

Before dawn today a building took from us three young men who had great hopes for the years to come. They were not to blame. Maybe nobody was to blame. It is impossible to predict what a fire will do, or how any building, new or old, will react to fire.

If firemen are to fight fire they have to fight fire where it is. They must get up on it. When they were hired they agreed to take risks, and every fire, large or small, has a potential incalculable risk, that Fire Chief Luther Broome or anyone else can ever know. They too their risk and the building did the unexpected. They are gone this morning.

Trained for Valor

They are not heroes, in that sense, and do not claim to be. But many of them do heroic things that are far beyond the call of duty. They have been trained that way and they do it as a part of the job without thinking of the cost they might have to pay in fulfilling their duty.

When I go to bed and to sleep in peace, there are those who look after my safety. All firemen and enforcement officers, policemen, deputies, etc., live with the same spectra, but it is an interesting life and that is why many of them stick to it.

One never knows what interesting experience, or what tragedy, might be around the next corner, or on the next shift. Firemen, like railroad trainmen, learn to love the excitement and the smoke and dirt and the wetness of their job. I wore their uniform with pride and still have a soft place in my heart for all who wear a uniform.

Dalton lost today. Dalton lost something of itself, its life. Three young men, went to their death, protecting our property, a forth was hurt. There is no reason to say anything about that particular building. If it had not been that building it might have been my home or your place of business. What can we do about it? Nothing about their loss. Neither can we refill the aching hearts of their families. We can't take their places, though some more of Dalton's fine young men will be called to that duty. Maybe we can help to care for their families.

Reduce Some Hazards

We can do our best to take some of the hazards from their tasks by a strict inspection of business and manufacturing buildings with ordinances that will require the abatement of hazards found, and with better pay and as good working conditions as circumstances will allow.

I am sure we can respect the sound of their bell and siren when they hit the streets and give them the right-of-way.

Personally, I think the city should designate some minister as chaplain to minister to the spiritual needs of those who cannot attend church regularly.

They are not a bunch who “loaf” around most of the time. They are at work for long hours as you and I think of work and when the bell hits they are on the way within 30 to 40 seconds at a task as necessary to civilization as stores and cars and homes and manufacturing, and though it has now been many years since I wore their uniform, I have a profound respect for their loyalty and faithfulness to their task.

An old adage says never talk about a man until you have walked in his shoes many days. I have walked in their shoes with pride in my job as a fireman.

Fatalities First For Department – March 30, 1964

Taken from the Daily Citizen News, reported by Lloyd Gullledge.

Three firemen were killed and a fourth injured early today when a brick wall fell on them at the scene of a fire on E. Walnut Ave.

Dead on arrival at the hospital were Lt. Charles (Chigger) Joyce, 38 of 1021 Colorado Drive; Johnnie W. Wofford, 38 of 609 Stillwood Drive and John Earle Ingle, 23 of 301 Pine Hill Drive.

Admitted to the hospital with multiple injuries including lacerations of the face was Raymond Phelps, 29, of 15 Cedar St.

They are the City Fire Department's first fatalities.

The building which housed Commercial Mills, Inc., at 107 E. Walnut Ave. was consumed by flames.

Alarm Sounded

Fire Chief Luther Broome said the fire department received the call at 3:35 a.m. When firemen

arrived the building was on fire almost all over and the truck had to stop some distance from the fire, he said. The roof soon collapsed leaving the walls standing, the chief recalled.

The four men spraying water into the building through the front door or front windows, when the front wall collapsed and fell out into the street. Mr. Ingle and Mr. Phelps were only partly covered by the debris. They were soon pulled free and rushed to the hospital. Firemen, policemen, ambulance attendants and several volunteers from Dalton Carpet Finishing Co. across the street worked frantically for about 15 minutes before they found the bodies of Lt. Joyce and Mr. Wofford.

Minute Earlier

Chief Broome said he had just talked with Lt. Joyce a minute earlier and had gone around behind the building to help get other lines into operation from another truck.

Another fireman, Dave Keener, saw the wall fall. So did an employee of Dalton Carpet Coating Co., Tommy Wimpy, and several other persons nearby.

Mr. Keener yelled to his fellow firemen as the wall began to collapse. He managed to escape to safety.

Mr. Wimpy said he saw the wall start to fall and yelled for the firemen to move back, but he didn't think they heard him because of the noise. He said that apparently one of the men also saw the wall start to collapse and called out to the others. They started to run, he said, but the wall caught them.

Chief Broome said it was not known who turned in the alarm. Somebody called and said a house was on fire, he stated.

Started In West

Chief Broome said the fire apparently started in the west side of the main building which houses the Commercial mills, Inc. This firm was engaged in a small latexing business at the plant. This firm operated a small latexing plant equipped with a gas-fired oven. Chief Broome said, adding that the plant had been closed down since Friday. Small narrow goods up to 48 inches was latexed by the firm at this plant, he said.

Loopers machine shop and office were located in the west side of the building. The entire building is commonly known as Looper Warehouse or the old Looper Foundry.

Mr. Looper was in Newnan visiting his son Harold Looper, it was reported, and could not be reached by a reporter this morning.

Latex Plant

Chief Broome said the latexing plant was owned by Barney Chitwood, Buford Chitwood and

Frank McClure. Space was rented from Mr. Looper.

Ten firemen including Chief Broome, answered the call. After the tragedy other off-duty firemen were summoned.

The temperature was about 22 degrees, and a gusty north wind blowing. Chief Broome thinks the strong wind may have played a part in blowing the wall down after the roof collapsed.

It was the first time in history of the Dalton Fire Department a fireman has been killed while on duty, according to Chief Broome, who consulted with a former chief Hardy Springfield.